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TAGS: [PREL](#) [TU](#) [NL](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S EU CANDIDACY AND DUTCH POLITICS

REF: A. THE HAGUE 1290 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. USEU BRUSSELS 4009

Classified By: Ambassador Sobel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The recent defection of one member of parliament from the Liberal (VVD) party over the issue of Turkish accession to the EU is forcing the Dutch government to consider potential domestic repercussions of the Turkish EU debate. So far, PM Balkenende has set the tone of the discussion by stressing that a "deal is a deal," and the coalition cabinet has demonstrated admirable discipline in toeing this line. As several critical dates approach, however, domestic political debate is expected to heat up considerably. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The debate over Turkey is sharpening as a starting date for accession talks looms and opponents speak out. Recent think tank and panel reports and a public squabble between Liberal MP's in the Netherlands are making it harder for Prime Minister Balkenende's government to continue framing the issue as a neutral question of logic and fairness - "if" Turkey fulfills the political Copenhagen criteria, "then" the EU will fulfill its side of the bargain by opening negotiations on accession. This strategy has been inherently strengthened by the Dutch government's efforts to portray itself as a neutral "honest broker" during the Dutch EU presidency.

Domestic Politics in Flux

[1](#)3. (C) In a major falling out, the VVD (conservative liberal party and junior partner in the coalition) recently expelled mid-level MP Geert Wilders for his vociferous anti-Turkey stance and refusal to toe the party line favoring Turkey. It may have ended his mainstream career, however, recent polls suggest he could head a list of parliamentary candidates today and capture between four and nine seats in the second chamber. Marnix Krop, Director General for EU affairs at the MFA, told the DCM recently that Wilders could springboard to prominence by arousing difficult-to-manage populist sentiments based on deeply held fears and prejudices. This would repeat the experience of the late Pim Fortuyn whose far-right LPF, now in disarray, was founded on anti-immigrant feelings.

[1](#)4. (C) A more immediate concern for the Dutch government is the impact the Wilders' affair could have on the ruling coalition. Interestingly, Wilder's challenge appears to have pushed the VVD -- traditionally Euro- and Turkey-skeptics -- to clarify its position on Turkey in favor of the Government's line. While the cabinet remains united, the parties themselves are clearly worried about public anti-Turkish accession sentiments. Following the Wilders' debacle, VVD Chief Jozias Van Aartsen publicly stated that the VVD "unanimously" supported the Government's position, but also left the door open to suggestions that the issue could be put to a referendum in the (distant) future. A senior spokesman in the PM's own party confided recently that a majority of CDA members would vote against Turkish accession if given the opportunity "to vote their conscience."

Opinion Makers Lining Up on Both Sides,
with Public Opinion Still Coalescing

[1](#)5. (C) The Dutch government has not commented officially on any of the recently published think pieces and advisory panel reports that have come down on both sides of the Turkey question. They await instead the October 6 Commission report, which will "actually have an impact" on EU decision making

[1](#)6. (C) At the September 8 presentation of the Ahtisaari Commission report in The Hague, European Ambassadors, senior diplomats and representatives from academia worried that the EU politicians and media have failed in their duty to build a solid public case for Turkey. This is certainly the case in the Netherlands, where the leadership's "deal is a deal" argument has only limited resonance outside official circles. The recent flap over Turkey's adultery law has not helped.

Emboffs' recent informal discussions with Dutch colleagues, from a range of backgrounds and interests, reveal anger and frustration over Turkey. Worry based on substantive issues seems equally matched by anger over being railroaded by politicians to accept a preset plan, come what may.

Tie-in to the Constitutional Referenda

17. (C) Several observers, including Krop, noted that Dutch voters could punish politicians by rejecting the Treaty of Constitution in the tentative March 2005 referendum if they feel an unpopular decision on Turkey was foisted upon them. If turnout is low -- as it generally is for EU-related votes -- then a small, motivated group could influence the result and use this "success" as a springboard for broader political ambitions. (This is one of the scenarios some feel Wilders may be pursuing.) The referendum is the first in Dutch history and its legal status remains somewhat vague. Nevertheless, the government would not be able to ignore an expression of public will on a vital issue

The Commission Report

18. (C) At least until the recent set back of the penal code reform in Turkey, Dutch officials privately encouraged us to expect a "positive" EU Commission report on October 6. Dutch FM Bot told Ambassador Sobel recently that the "impact statement" would be a important element in determining how the public approaches Turkish accession talks. The impact statement would address central worries, such as how the EU will share structural, agricultural and solidarity benefits with Turkey, assuming these programs will look the same then as they do now. Bot noted (based on his discussions with Commissioner Verheugen) that the impact statement might include some "surprises" that would help make it easier to deal with public fears. On the main report itself, in a meeting on September 10 with EUR/ERA Director Peter Chase and the DCM, Jaap Werner said the question for the Dutch government is not just whether Turkey gets a "yes," but what extra "tools are put around it.... No new tests but what accompanying measures" to assuage public concerns. He admitted that the EU is not above "temporization, including proposing a longer period to negotiate."

SOBEL